

The history of the integration between Russia's Kaliningrad region and Poland's northeastern voivodeships: a programme approach

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THE HISTORY
OF THE INTEGRATION
BETWEEN RUSSIA'S
KALININGRAD REGION
AND POLAND'S
NORTHEASTERN
VOIVODESHIPS:
A PROGRAMME APPROACH

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K. Żęgota²



This article considers the development of integration between Russia's Kaliningrad region and Poland's northeastern voivodeships in 1946–2016. The authors set out to identify the main results of Russian-Polish cross-border cooperation in the context of the changing historical and political paradigms in the Baltic region. The authors conduct a brief historical analysis of this sphere of international relations. The genesis of integration at the regional level is explored by identifying the major areas and tools for collaboration. The authors address research works of Russian (Soviet) and Polish researchers, intergovernmental agreements, EU-Russia cross-border cooperation programmes, expert interviews, and relevant analytical reports. Special attention is paid to programme-based interregional and cross-border cooperation as the most efficient form of collaboration for accelerating integration and socioeconomic development in border areas. Based on their evaluation of the major achievements, the authors conclude that Russian-Polish cross-border cooperation has been successful. Yet, there is a need for developing a long-term empirical model of Russian-Polish relations in view of the many-years' collaboration between the Kaliningrad region and the Polish voivodeships.

Key words: Russia, European Union, Russian-Polish relations, cross-border cooperation, Kaliningrad region, northeastern voivodeships, border checkpoints

Introduction

The ties between the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation and Poland's northwestern voivodeships have always depended on foreign policy factors. At first, these were Soviet-Polish and, later, Russian-Polish relations. Another important influence was the international cooperation environment and

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the intergovernmental relations mechanisms that developed in the post-war world order system [35]. The Yalta-Potsdam system — which is *de jure* still in existence — is losing its relevance in the flux of global integration processes and international cooperation. This brings to the fore the regional and local-level mechanisms of international cooperation. Considerable experience has accumulated in collaboration between the Kaliningrad region of Russia (until 1991, the RSFSR) and the northwestern voivodeships of Poland. This experience can be divided into two distinctive periods. The first one covers the years 1946—1991 when any international connections of the Kaliningrad region were restricted by the region's closed status in the USSR. The second period covers the years 1991 onwards. During that time, the region has been open to external contacts. Naturally, Poland's border voivodeships became its principal partners. A crucial event was Poland's accession to the EU, which created new institutional and programme conditions for transboundary cooperation with Russia's Kaliningrad region. Later, the programme format of Russian-Polish border cooperation evolved into a major tool for analysing and assessing the region's relations with Poland's northeastern voivodeships.

Integration links between the Kaliningrad region of Russia and the northeastern voivodeships in 1946—1991

The 1946—1991 period of Soviet-Polish relations has been studied in the context of the Kaliningrad region by a number of Russian and Polish scholars who try to demonstrate how the concept of interregional cooperation evolved in the years of 'Soviet-Polish friendship' [20; 24; 32; 36]. The common origin of the Soviet and Polish regions, which emerged on the territory of former East Prussia after World War II, was a gift and a curse. The residents of the Soviet Kaliningrad region and the northeastern Polish voivodeships were settling new lands in a similar cultural and historical setting. Most of them had to take the risk of leaving their familiar surroundings to look for a better life for their families. V. M. Kuzmin, in considering the Soviet-Polish relations through the prism of collaborations between party and public organisations, emphasised the exceptional circumstances of the historical, economic, and political development of the USSR's and Poland's bordering regions. 'These regions are connected by a common motorway and railway network and they have common land improvement and energy systems. Whereas the newly established Kaliningrad region was settled by people from twenty regions and three autonomous republics of the RSFSR and six regions of Belarus, the new Polish voivodeships were settled by people from across the country and repatriates from the USSR' [7, p. 7].

The lowering of administrative barriers and the onset of Khrushchev's thaw had a positive effect on the openness of the Soviet state to external contacts with socialist allies. This is corroborated by P. P. Polkh who argues that Russian-Polish cross-border cooperation started on June 30, 1956, when the USSR and the People's Republic of Poland signed a treaty on cooperation in production, culture, and other areas. A special resolution of the Central Committee of the CPSU of August 1956 stressed the need for cooperation

between the Kaliningrad region and the Olsztyn voivodeship [14, p. 140]. The newly established Elbląg and Suwałki voivodeships joined the collaboration with the Soviet region after the 1975 administrative division reform. As W. Modzelewski writes, the current Russian-Polish land border stretching over 209.83 km was established only in 1999. Its westernmost section crosses the Vistula lagoon to form a 22.21 km maritime border [38, p. 9].

In developing a periodisation of Soviet-Polish cross-border cooperation, V. M. Kuzmin explains the qualitative and quantitative increase in bilateral contacts between the Kaliningrad region of the RSFSR and Poland's border voivodeships using data from Soviet party documents. The analysis and data are inconclusive: 'In 1956, 163 Kaliningraders visited the Olsztyn voivodeship. In 1970, the region and the voivodeship exchanged 29 delegations and groups comprising 469 people on each side. In 1978—1979, the Kaliningrad region sent 99 delegations and groups, totalling 1,704 people, and welcomed 94 delegations and groups, totalling 1,674 people. In 1986—1987, the voivodeship and the region exchanged three thousand people comprising 500 delegations, which was the largest number of visits over the thirty years of cooperation' [7, p. 258].

Polish researchers from the University of Gdansk, R. Anisiewicz and T. Palmowski, explain such a moderate number of border crossings by the extreme politicisation of the existing contacts. The membership in groups and delegations had to be approved by the leadership of party and union organisations, which often served propagandistic goals. This idea is taken a step further by O. A. Shashkova who writes that propagandistic materials on socialism building and the communist movement of the 20th century accounted for 45 % of 150 collections of documents on Russian-Polish relations, published in 1920—1990 [27, p. 66].

Using the data from Polish public institutions, R. Anisiewicz and T. Palmowski estimate the number of the crossings of the Soviet-Polish border in 1956—1989 at 233 thousand, stressing that the perestroika years (1988—1989) accounted for 57 % of such crossings [28, p. 17].

It is important to understand that the residents of the Kaliningrad region did not have an opportunity to cross the Soviet-Polish border freely. The region was closed and all international contacts were highly formalised. However, even the small number of contacts between Kaliningraders and the residents of the border voivodeships helped to overcome the feeling of isolation, facilitated cultural and trade exchange, and contributed to innovations in organisation and technology. The Polish historian E. Wojnowski argues that such contacts helped to curb xenophobia and challenged the stereotypes of the peoples living across the border [44, p. 56].

The artificial restriction of bilateral contacts was, to a great degree, the initiative of local authorities that were afraid of incurring Moscow's displeasure by excessive openness and enthusiasm in forging contacts with the neighbours. However, there were certain achievements. These included the development of a four-year cooperation programme for 1987—1990, by the party committees of the Kaliningrad region and the Olsztyn voivodeship. The relevant protocol to the Declaration on Soviet-Polish cooperation in ideology, science, and culture was signed on May 27, 1987 [7]. From the perspective of the history of international relations, that document was an im-

portant landmark on the way to programme-based cooperation. Despite the problems in Russian-Polish relations and regime changes, the programme has been in effect for 29 years. The most recent Programme for cooperation between the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation and the Warmian-Masurian voivodeship of the Republic of Poland was signed by the acting governor of the Kaliningrad region Anton Alikhanov and the Warmian-Masurian voivodeship marshal Gustaw Brzezina in Kaliningrad on December 15, 2016 [2].

Municipalities played an important role in the Soviet-Polish cross-border collaboration. In 1977, a Soviet-Polish friendship memorial created by sculptor E. A. Popov was ceremonially opened in Kaliningrad to celebrate the long-standing cooperation and friendship between the Kaliningrad region and the Olsztyn and Elbląg voivodeships. This partnership dated back to 1959 when Kaliningrad, Olsztyn, and Elbląg were declared sister cities [13]. Local residents and tourists visit the memorial — today, a state-protected cultural heritage site. There are two streets named after Olsztyn and Elbląg in Kaliningrad, although Olsztyn's Kaliningrad street was renamed Dworcowa (Railway Station) in the 1990s [41].



Fig. 1. Soviet-Polish friendship memorial in Kaliningrad [8]

In general, cooperation between the Kaliningrad region and Poland's border voivodeships until 1991 can be estimated as relatively productive. A significant limitation on the development of bilateral contacts, especially personal ones, was the closed status of the region. However, cooperation between cultural and educational institutions was rapidly developing at the time. This provided groundwork for future collaboration in a new international environment, which emerged after the collapse of the USSR and a change in the geopolitical position of the Kaliningrad region.

The legal and institutional framework for cooperation after 1991

The early 1990s were an enormous challenge to most territories of the former USSR. The rupture of established socioeconomic and industrial ties led to the loss of political reference points. The Kaliningrad region of the RSFSR had been a closed territory but the restrictions on mutual border crossings were lifted. In the first half of the 1990s, commercial contacts between Russians and Poles were rapidly developing. According to the Polish customs service, the number of crossings of the Russian-Polish border was gradually increasing from 1991 to exceed 5,000,000 instances in 1997 [28, p. 19]. This was a result of not only the lowering of administrative barriers but also the launch of infrastructure projects focusing on motorways, railways, seaport cargo handling, etc. In 1992, the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Poland on border checkpoints was concluded. The border could be crossed at the following points [4]:

- 1) railway checkpoints:
 - a. Mamonovo-Braniewo;
 - b. Bagrationovsk-Bartoszyce;
 - c. Zheleznodorozhny-Skandawa;
- 2) motorway checkpoints:
 - a. Mamonovo-Gronowo;
 - b. Mamonovo-Grzechotki;
 - c. Bagrationovsk-Bezledy;
 - d. Gusev-Goldap.

On December 7, 2010, the Mamonovo 2-Grzechotki international checkpoint was opened to accommodate the increasing number of border crossings, which had caused the existing checkpoints to operate at full capacity.

Reductions in the number of cross-border movements between the Kaliningrad region and Poland's northeastern voivodeships, which took place in 1998 and 2008, were usually associated with economic crises and plummeting exchange rates [28].

The principles of bilateral cooperation in a new geopolitical environment were enshrined in the Agreement between the Government of the Russian Federation and the Government of the Republic of Poland on cooperation between the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation and the northeastern voivodeships of the Republic of Poland, which was signed on May 22, 1992 [19]. The agreement has been in effect for a quarter of century. It is remarkable that the Consulate General of the Republic of Poland functioning since May 7, 1992, was the first diplomatic mission to open in the Kaliningrad region. The first representative of Poland in Kaliningrad was Consul General and Minister Plenipotentiary Jerzy Bahr [26].

An interesting phenomenon of international relations in the 1990s was the missions of Russian regions abroad. Amid the post-Soviet chaos, Moscow did not have time to get into the details of regional international initia-



tives. Federal law No. 4-FZ On coordinating international and foreign economic ties of regions of the Russian Federation was adopted only on January 4, 1999 [22]. The Kaliningrad region had three missions abroad — in Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus. The most effective was the Kaliningrad Mission in Poland, which was established by a decree of the head of the regional administration Yu. Matochkin on September 16, 1992. The first representative of the region in Poland was O. Turushev. He was succeeded by Yu. Annenkov (1996—2004) and Yu. Rozhkov-Yuryevsky (2004—2007) [17].

In 1997—2000, the operations of the Kaliningrad Mission were largely determined by Poland's administrative division reform, which created new municipalities, the country's accession to NATO (1999), and the preparation for the accession to the EU (2004). A major concern was the new visa rules [45]. Dramatic changes took place in voivode's offices and sejmiks. The administrative reform made all bilateral agreements between the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation and the Polish voivodeships legally ineffective. Thus, one of the key objectives of the Mission was to establish contacts with new heads of the voivodeships and to prepare new cooperation agreements. The contacts with the Łódź, Lublin, Podlaskie, and Subcarpathian voivodeships were not enshrined in international agreements.

In 2007, the governor of the Kaliningrad region G. Boos closed the Kaliningrad Missions abroad due to their ineffectiveness [11]. Today, the conclusion about the ineffectiveness of the regional mission in Poland seems ungrounded. It would also be wrong to argue that the Mission duplicated the functions of the Russian embassy and consulates. Naturally, a number of characteristics make a diplomatic institution a vehicle of national foreign policy interests. The primary objective of the Kaliningrad Mission in Poland was developing cross-border contacts with Polish regions and targeted actions aimed at resuming, creating, and maintaining commercial, economic, cultural, historical, scientific, and other *local-level* (our italics) ties.

Alongside the opening of the Mission in Poland in 1992, a number of Russian-Polish advisory bodies started their operation. One of them was the Russian-Polish Council on Cooperation between the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation and the regions of the Republic of Poland. Its first meeting took place in Svetlogorsk in October 1994 and the last — sixteenth — one in Olsztyn on October 5, 2016 [1]. The Council comprised twelve commissions focusing on such issues as checkpoint operations, combating crime, environmental protection, joint use of the Vistula lagoon, the use EU funds, etc. The effectiveness of the Council was ensured by the involvement of high-ranking officials — the governor of the Kaliningrad region on the Russian side and, until recently, the deputy minister of foreign affairs, on the Polish side.

Programme-based cooperation

The rapid development of Russian-Polish cross-border contacts in the 1990s laid down groundwork for programme-based cooperation. Sometimes this process was included in the higher-level interactions between the regions of the Baltic Sea. One of the first interregional mechanisms was the



euoregion institution [33, p. 267]. A euoregion is a European region comprising border areas of two or more European states. The term dates back to the oldest European initiative — the Euroregion transboundary cooperation programme, which was launched in 1958 to bring together German and Dutch borderlands [42, p. 96]. Much later, in February 1998, Euroregion Baltic (ERB) was created. It comprised border areas of Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Sweden and the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation [37].

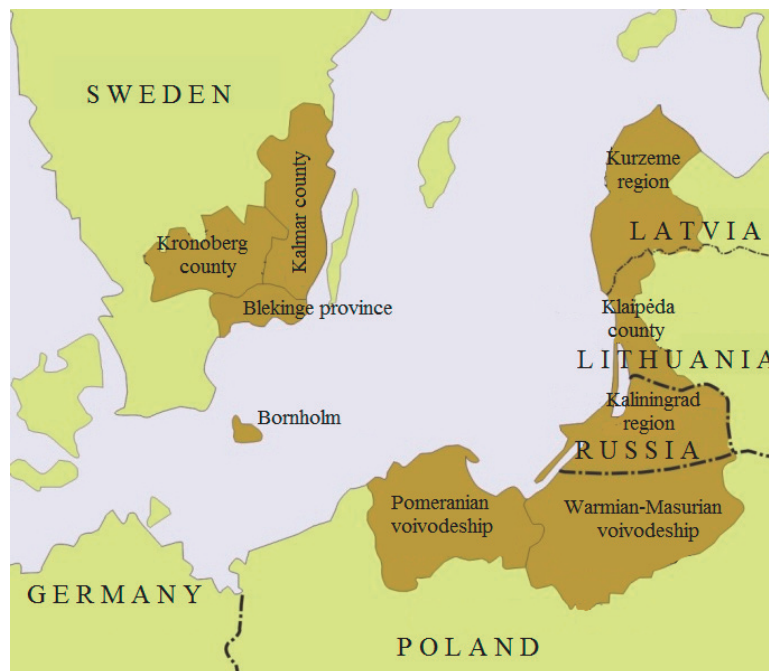


Fig. 2. Euroregion Baltic [3]

ERB became somewhat of a hub for transboundary contacts between ordinary citizens, politicians, economic partners, social activists, and public and educational institutions. The Euroregion supervised the PHARE programme. In 1999—2006, according to the ERB secretariat, the PHARE programme had two major priorities — cooperation in the Baltic Sea region and collaboration with the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation. Over six million euro was earmarked to the applicants from ten countries who implemented projects aimed to support small and medium enterprises and educational institutions, to promote youth exchange programmes, and to hold sporting and cultural events, conferences, and workshops [29].

One of the key objectives of ERB is to develop strategic initiatives aimed at the sustainable development of collaborating regions. Despite the often-voiced scepticism about the effectiveness of the euoregion institutions, ERB has evolved into an important political platform for forwarding common interests at the levels of regional and national administrations and the European Union. Tangible results include the contribution of ERB to the



adoption of resolutions on the common problems of the Baltic region (EU policy on cohesion, navigation, environmental protection, and transport infrastructure). Another major result of political cooperation in the framework of ERB is the South Baltic Cross-border Cooperation Programme [29]. As W. Jastrzębska stresses, ‘the EU considers euroregions a form of regional policy and a tool to include the new member-states into the structures of united Europe. Euroregions are shaped by different political and economic interests. According to official EU documents, euroregions must serve the common good through consolidating efforts beyond national borders’ [31, p. 103]. The Kaliningrad participation in the euroregion structures was met with both enthusiasm and scepticism. This institution was the first trans-boundary alliance that de facto recognised the equal right of the Kaliningrad region to contribute to a common Baltic policy.

The region’s accession to the euroregion structures gave confidence that partner regions facing similar problems would provide necessary support, which was very important in the period of economic instability [46]. The funds allocated for the ERB projects in 1998—2005 amounted to 8.9 million euro, which was enough to support 240 initiatives. The experience of holding international meetings and implementing joint projects was invaluable. Later, it helped the Kaliningrad region to adapt to the EU’s new programme policy towards border regions and to lay down groundwork for a long-term partnership. In 2017, according to the annual rotation principle, Sweden’s Kalmar county will assume the presidency over ERB. Partnership priorities will include youth cooperation, water source protection, and tourism development [5]. However, the activities undertaken in the framework of the other euroregions with the Kaliningrad and Polish participation — Neman, Šešupe, and Łyna-Lawa — were much more modest than those pursued by ERB. As a rule, the other regions focused on meetings between officials and joint socially significant projects.

In analysing the history of programme-based cooperation between the EU border regions and the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation, it is important to remember that a wide spectrum of political and financial instruments with different goals and criteria was used in different periods. These instruments also differed in decision-making procedures and legal implementation of decisions.

In the 1990s, the key EU tool for supporting cross-border and interregional cooperation financed from European structural funds was the INTERREG initiative. It was followed by INTERREG I (1990—1993), INTERREG II (1994—1999), and INTERREG III (2000—2006) [39]. The Kaliningrad region did not share a land border with the EU before Poland’s accession. That is why the region was covered by intergovernmental programmes. This decision was based on the belief that intergovernmental cooperation was more comprehensive than cross-border contacts and thus better suited to meet the needs of the maritime Baltic region. This was a grand project. At the final INTERREG III stage, the programme’s budget was estimated at 4.875 billion euro [10].

The INTERREG programme was implemented simultaneously with TACIS (Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States), which brought together the EU and 13 partners in Eastern Europe and Cen-

tral Asia. The two programmes functioned independently but they were coordinated. TACIS was initially aimed at implementing projects with regions of third countries, whose economies were undergoing a transition. It is important to understand that the functional part of the TACIS programme was developed by the European structures in 1991 in great haste. They had neither necessary information, nor cooperation experience, nor strong ties in newly established republics. The official stance was that the geopolitical changes, which were brought about by the collapse of the USSR, created a political, economic, and social vacuum, which had to be filled [43]. TACIS comprised national and multilateral programmes. One of the latter was a cross-border cooperation programme bringing together four states — Russia (including the Kaliningrad region), Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine. In 1991—1999, over 4.226 million euro was allocated to support 3,000 projects. In 2000—2006, the programme's budget amounted to 3.138 million euro. In the Russian Federation, TACIS focused on support for institutional, legal, and administrative reforms, for private sector and economic development, for overcoming the transition effect, and for nuclear security.

After the enlargement of the European Union in May 2004, the issues of European transboundary cooperation were singled out to form the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument (ENPI). The ENPI was a mechanism for developing the EU's external relations. Since 2006, EU regulations have not used the term INTERREG. However, it continued to exist unofficially as somewhat of a brand (INTERREG IV). A Russian exclave sandwiched between EU member states, the Kaliningrad region became part of the Lithuania-Poland-Russia trilateral cross-border cooperation programme for 2007—2013. In effect, due to a delay in the signing of financial agreements, the programme was approved only at the end of 2008 and launched at the beginning of 2010.



Fig. 3. The scope of the Lithuania-Poland-Russia programme for 2007—2013 [21]



The programme had a solid legal framework based on Regulation (EC) No 1638/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 October, 2006, laying down general provisions establishing a European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, and Regulation (EC, Euratom) No 1605/2002 of June 25, 2002, on the Financial Regulation applicable to the general budget of the European Communities. The programme's preamble stressed that the EU was particularly interested in the Kaliningrad region surrounded by EU member states. Its objective was to support the development of the socio-economic potential of the Kaliningrad region and the adjacent areas. The Lithuania-Poland-Russia CBS programme was designed to give a local and transboundary perspective to possible solutions and ensure a 'leverage' effect [18].

The programme's budget totalled 146 million euro — over 124 million provided from the EU funds and approximately 22 million euro by the Russian Federation. Sixty projects received financing within the programme, including 53 regular projects selected through open competition and seven major strategic projects.

The major strategic projects addressed the common problems of the Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian regions covered by the programme. Four projects focused on environmental protection, namely, improving the ecological quality of the Neman River and the Baltic Sea, ensuring the sustainable development of coastal zones and improving the quality of nearshore waters of the Vistula lagoon, the Bay of Gdansk, and South-East Baltic in general. The other three projects sought to improve the region's accessibility. They boosted the development of near-border transport infrastructure and increased traffic safety at checkpoints on the border between the Kaliningrad region, Poland, and Lithuania (Kaliningrad-Mamonovo 2, Sovetsk-Panemunė, and Gusev-Goldap). The total budget of major projects amounted to 78,418 million euro. Twelve new infrastructure objects were erected, 22 km of new roads, bridges, and elevated highways were built, and 64 km of water drain and sewage pipes were laid to meet the needs of two million people residing in the border areas [15, p. 149]. According to the head of the Joint Technical Secretariat of the programme Małgorzata Woźniak, the Lithuania-Poland-Russia CBS programme for 2007—2013 stood out in the underlying political situation and created a link between the EU and Russia. The programme not only helped to overcome barriers to the region's sustainable development but also contributed to mutual understanding between the EU and Russia [15, p. 5].

The conclusion of the programme was officially announced at the final conference of the programme and the conference dedicated to the launch of the Poland-Russia CBS programme for 2014—2020, which were united into one event held in Gdansk on December 8, 2016 [12].



Fig. 4. Scope of the Poland-Russia programme for 2014—2020 [40]

According to the new EU financial perspective for 2014—2020, the Lithuania-Poland-Russia programme for 2007—2013 is to be divided into two programmes — Poland-Russia 2014—2020 and Lithuania-Russia 2014—2020 — in the framework of the European Neighbourhood Instrument. It is declared that, in a long-term perspective, the successful implementation of the Poland-Russia programme for 2014—2020 will contribute to closer integration of the programme territory on both sides of the Russian-Polish border. The programme includes Poland's Pomeranian, Warmian-Masurian, and Podlaskie voivodeships and Russia's Kaliningrad region. Its budget totals 61.9 million euro — 41.3 million provided from the EU funds and 20.6 million by the Russian Federation. Grants will be allocated for projects aimed at promoting local culture and historical heritage, environmental protection, improving transport and communications infrastructure, and providing assistance to border management and security. The Lithuania-Russia 2014—2020 programme was approved on December 19, 2016. Its budget totals 17 million euro [30].

Conclusions

An analysis of bilateral ties between the Kaliningrad region and Poland's northeastern voivodeships requires considering two cooperation periods — from 1946 to 1991 and from 1991 onwards. During the first period, cooperation was restricted by objective factors, such as the closed status of the Kaliningrad region and the impossibility of personal cross-border contacts. After 1991, cooperation intensified as a legal and institutional framework for Russian-Polish border cooperation emerged [36].



Naturally, amid a cooling of intergovernmental ties between Russia and the European Union, the very fact of launching a new round of CBS programmes is a great success. As a rule, joint projects do not have a political dimension but they directly influence the socioeconomic development of border regions. Despite the positive developments, some Russian experts believe that there is a 'catch' at the very stage of application approval. Members of European secretariats might decline projects, which are crucial for the Russian side, on technicalities and lobby Polish or Lithuanian projects, which will receive additional financing from Russia. There is a need for an objective approach to application examination as well as for professional and experienced members of secretariats.

The Russian and the Polish sides agree that the goals of the EU's major interregional and cross-border cooperation instruments were achieved in regard to the Kaliningrad region in 1991—2016. Therefore, the reasons behind the unilateral decision of the Polish leadership to suspend the local border traffic (LBT) regime from July 4, 2016, are difficult to grasp. Over the four years of the LBT functioning, there was not a single case of a serious breach of the rules. The number of mutual border crossings and bilateral trade reached the absolute maximum [47]. Moreover, its uniqueness and significant contribution to the socioeconomic development of border areas made the Polish-Russian LBT mechanism a strong argument for expediting a visa-free-regime with the EU [6, p. 40]. The argumentation of the Polish side does not seem logical and, apparently, the decision has solely political grounds [34]. The residents of Poland's northeastern voivodeships and the Kaliningrad region are held hostage to the political situation, which has undermined the development of Russian-Polish relations for many years. The political cycles marked by changes in Polish elites severed long-lasting economic and business ties, had an adverse effect on bilateral trade, and undermined mutual trust. As early as 2012, the Polish researchers M. Chelminiak and W. Kotowicz wrote that the signing of the LBT agreement between the Kaliningrad region and Poland's voivodeships had broken the consensus among Polish political parties on Russian-Polish relations. At the time, some members of the Law and Justice party opposed the idea of preferential local border traffic and spoke of a potential military threat to Poland from the Kaliningrad enclave [25, p. 77]. After the right conservative parties had won the parliamentary election in Poland in 2015, the abolition of the LBT regime was just a matter of time. Today, it is obvious that, despite numerous appeals to Warsaw from the Polish public and municipalities for resuming the LBT regime, the situation will remain as it is until the political course of Poland's leadership changes again. The Kaliningrad region has not become a key priority for Polish diplomacy in relations with Russia.

According to A. A. Sergunin, in 2011—2013, the Baltic Sea region turned from a site of bloc struggle, which it had been during the Cold War, into an area of active and versatile governmental and non-governmental contacts, even though falling short of the cooperation ideal. Some Russian and international scholars called it a 'testing site' and a 'laboratory for European integration' to emphasise the unique and innovative nature of the modern Baltic region [16, p. 55].

In this context, the Kaliningrad region can serve Russia's foreign policy goals and become a political regulator of Russian-Polish bilateral relations. An important regional partner, Poland is a legitimate platform for establishing transit connections between the West and the East. Other important areas of cooperation include bilateral trade, research, technology, culture, tourism, and visa regulations. Today, the Kaliningrad region is preparing for hosting matches of the 2018 FIFA World Cup. Although the experiment in issuing short-term 72-hour visas to foreign citizens and stateless persons for visiting the Kaliningrad region was completed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs [9], the region's leadership is developing new mechanisms for visa-free entry to the region. Draft amendments to the federal law on the special economic zone on the territory of the Kaliningrad region is being submitted to the Government of the Russian Federation. If accepted, these amendments will ensure a simplified issue of one-entry business, tourist, and humanitarian visas valid for up to thirty days with a permission to stay in the Russian Federation for up to eight days. It will be possible to obtain a visa in electronic format upon approval from a federal executive authority specialising in foreign affairs [23].

In view of the long-lasting practical cooperation between the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation and the Polish voivodeships, it seems necessary to develop an empirical model of Russian-Polish relations for a long-term perspective. The authors believe that such a model should focus on adding weight to the 'Kaliningrad factor' in Moscow's foreign policy strategy for Poland, turning the region into a platform for international summits and scientific and cultural events, opening Russian-Polish dialogue centres in Kaliningrad, etc. If both sides take effort, such an approach will create an atmosphere of international openness in the region and help to reach sustainable compromises on contentious issues of bilateral relations.

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